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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000635

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: PROPOSED ANTI-CONVERSION LEGISLATION UNLIKELY TO
MOVE FORWARD

REF: A. COLOMBO 1889 2005

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 383

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (U) After more than eighteen months in legislative limbo, the Buddhist monk-based Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) anti-conversion bill showed faint signs of life when the Speaker of Parliament appointed Wijedasa Rajapakse, the Minister of State for Banks, to head the parliamentary select committee to review the bill, which makes "unethical conversion" illegal. When the bill was initially introduced in August 2004, the Supreme Court ruled that several clauses violated Article 10 of the Sri Lankan Constitution, which provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change one's religion by choice.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Venerable Athureliye Ratana Thero, the JHU parliamentary group leader and appointee to the new parliamentary committee, told us on April 18 that the committee will amend the bill in accord with the Supreme Court's recommendations. The committee consists of two Muslims, five Hindus, six Christians, and seven Buddhists (including the chairperson). If the bill is amended in committee, it could move to a second reading in parliament to be followed by general debate and an eventual vote. The bill will remain open to court challenges from parliamentarians or members of the public during this process. However, the bill may also remain stuck in Committee for an indefinite period.

[1](#)3. (SBU) A second JHU bill-- a constitutional amendment to make Buddhism the State religion-- proposed in September 2004 still has not had its day in parliament. Nevertheless, it remains on the "Order Paper," the list from which all agenda items are drawn. A bill's sponsor has to lobby to move a bill from the Order Paper to the agenda, but Venerable Ratana said the JHU will not attempt to do so. Similarly, an anti-conversion bill approved by the cabinet of then-President Kumaratunga in June 2005 has never been presented or discussed in parliament. There has been no discussion on that bill from any quarter since before the November 2005 presidential election.

[1](#)4. (C) Comment: The JHU bill has languished for over a year and does not seem to enjoy broad popular support. President Rajapaksa, in the lead-up to the November presidential polls,

made an election pact with the JHU that notably omitted mention of the anti-conversion legislation. President Rajapaksa has stated definitely to the Ambassador that he will not allow such a bill to pass. By many accounts, Committee chair Rajapakse (no relation to the President) is a life-long party loyalist likely to follow the President's lead. We assess it is unlikely that the bill will move past the committee stage. The Ambassador will raise the issue again with the President and other officials as needed. End comment.
LUNSTEAD